

Plants, Vegetables, Lawn: Radical Solidarities in Pandemic Times

by Giulia Carabelli | Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

ABSTRACT This essay presents photos and words illustrating practices of care in homes shared by humans and plants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on interviews with plant carers, I highlight how humans (re)discovered plants as kin during forced social isolation. I reflect on how plants provided joy, hope, and reassurance during crisis, enabling strong affective bonds with their human carers. I read the creation/cementing of affective bonds between humans and plants for its political significance, and I interrogate the activity of making home/kin with plants as the emergence of interspecies solidarities, which challenge anthropocentric narratives of worldmaking and reinsert non-human beings as central to the making of more just and inclusive futures.

KEYWORDS affect, solidarity, care, pandemic, plants

My Plants and I

I have been moving countries and jobs, and I have created new microcosms of living every few years, for many years. My experience of being rootless instructed ways of being that were always temporary, borrowed, and projected to the future in the absolute and constant need to find and create new space where I could exist with purpose. This overwhelming condition of precariousness fostered the assumption that I could never have plants or cats, or even too many things—all of which require stability because they don't travel well. But the promise of a three-year employment contract came with the unpractised feeling of a more stable kind of precarity.

I moved into a new apartment in September 2019 and began populating rooms with plants shortly after. Within months, I had plants everywhere. They are of different sizes and shades of green, except for the pink, purple, and white orchids in the middle of the dining table. Thanks to large windows and a southern exposure, my plants grew steadily, offering beauty, comfort, and the possibility of groundedness.

I like having them around when I work. To stop and inspect leaves has become a way of taking short breaks. I salute them when opening my eyes in the morning and wish them good night before switching the lights off. I spend time looking for pots that might better complement their natural traits, and I get upset and worry when they don't do well. I came

to feel responsible for my plants because they depend on me, whilst being aware that nurturing our relationship is mutually beneficial.

Once the first lockdown started in Northern Ireland, where I lived until August 2021, I found myself at home with my plants and I thanked them for being there, unconditionally. If socializing with humans was now forbidden, my plants were free to spend more time with me—repotting, trimming, repositioning, and propagating became daily routines and infiltrated my conversations with distant humans for many months to come, through new lockdowns and the seasonal change.

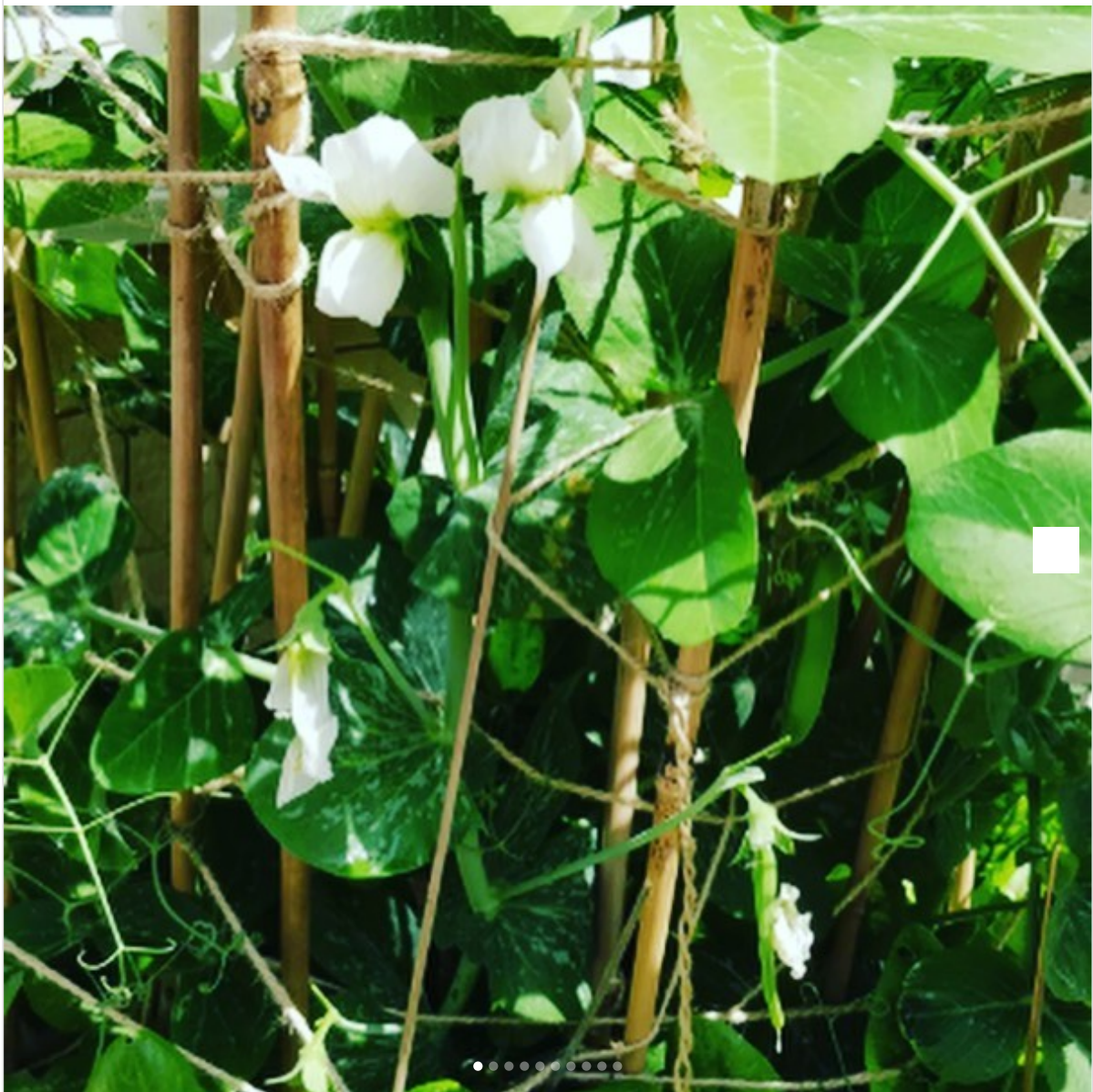
This essay elaborates on human-plant entanglements under conditions of pervasive global vulnerability and social isolation. I read the process of making home with plants during the pandemic as the emergence of more than human solidarities, which might support the creation of a future where all beings are treated equally and with justice. The essay is written in dialogue with the visual and aural material I collected since June 2020 as part of the *Care for Plants* project, which I initiated to study homemaking and care practices during the COVID-19 crisis.¹ The visual material (often accompanied by short testimonies) is archived in a dedicated Instagram page (IG:CareForPlants). As a supplement, I also conducted interviews (remotely) in July and October 2020.²

Care with Plants



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[@tinyplotofplants](#)' garden is so beautiful and even more so because it connects three generations of women! Such a beautiful story 🌱💖❤️ Thank you for sharing it with us !!! "I try to grow seeds every year, normally my mum and I do it together, but this year its been a bit rubbish because we have had to do it separately. She's been keeping me up to date with all her pictures she sends me which is class - her garden is much more established than mine! I have only really gotten interested in plants these past few years. I remember my granny phoning my mum to tell her gardeners world was on the tv and I would quickly vacate the living room! Now my mum is phoning me to say its on! My granny is no longer with us, but my mum has taken cuttings from the fushias in her garden and is bringing them on for me. Its just nice to have something I can look at and think that its linked to my granny."

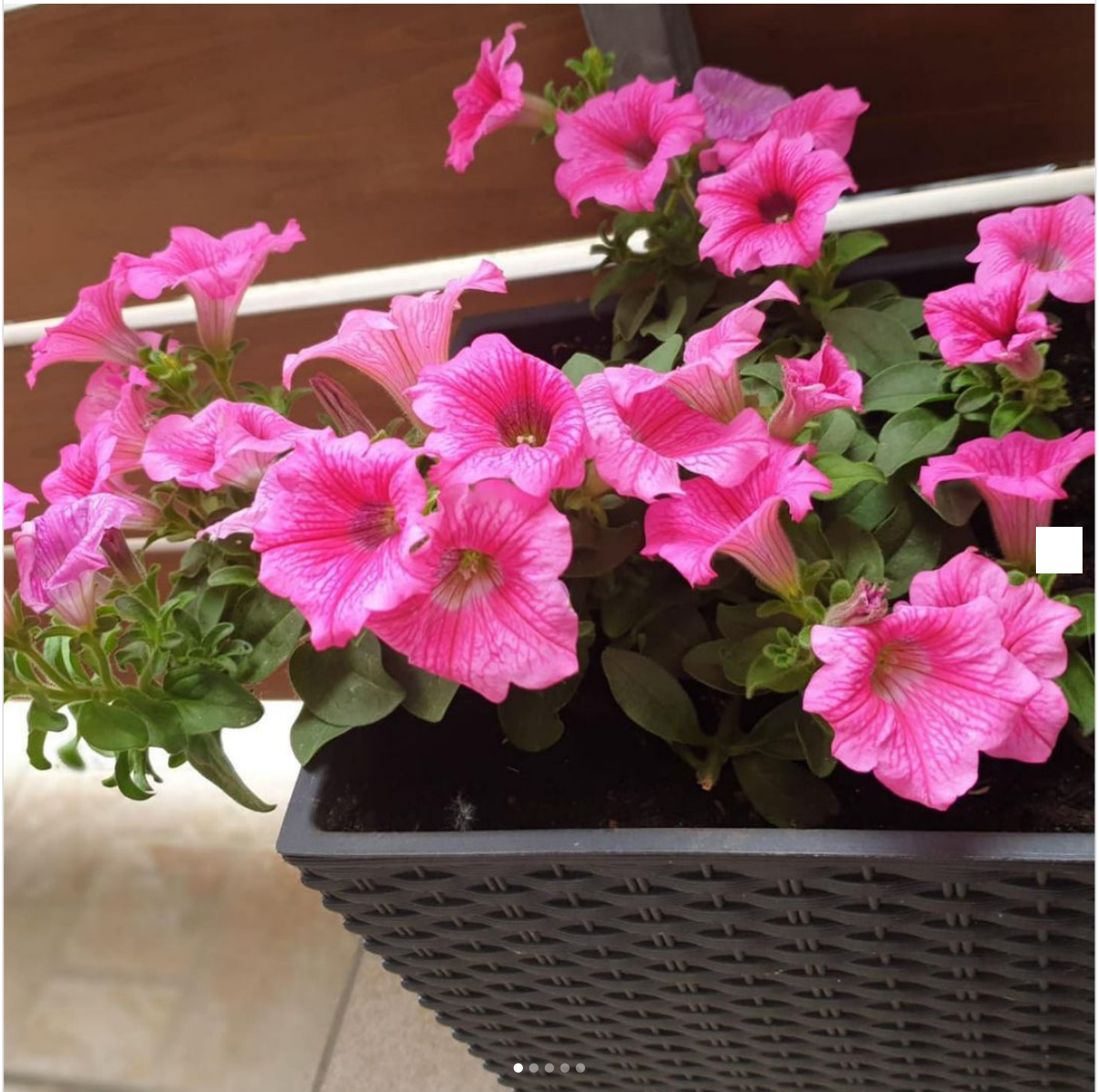
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It was kind of like a perfect storm of shit things to happen in my life. And then yeah, running, along with gardening, like, kind of gave me something to get up and do in the morning, but it was like even when I got up in the morning if I was feeling awful I was like oh I have to go out and check the plants. And then you go out and see a little seedling got about this much bigger [shows with fingers how much] or would have more leaves. And like, oh my god, I was so buzzing! Like last week when my first tomato plants grew their first green tomatoes I was buzzing for the whole day. . . . I feel probably the same as a lot of people, lockdown's kind of made you reassess what you take from life and I think I didn't really realize how much I was missing nature and being in greenery and stuff before. . . . You might not be able to get that always if you live in a city, but you can always have a houseplant or have something there. I don't know what it is, they're just kind of peaceful I suppose, like makes you reconnect with like I don't know, who . . . you're supposed to be in nature. (B., Interview, 07 July 2020)



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Good morning for @merita.zekovic ' garden 🇩🇪 a true explosion of colours 💖🌸🌻🌿

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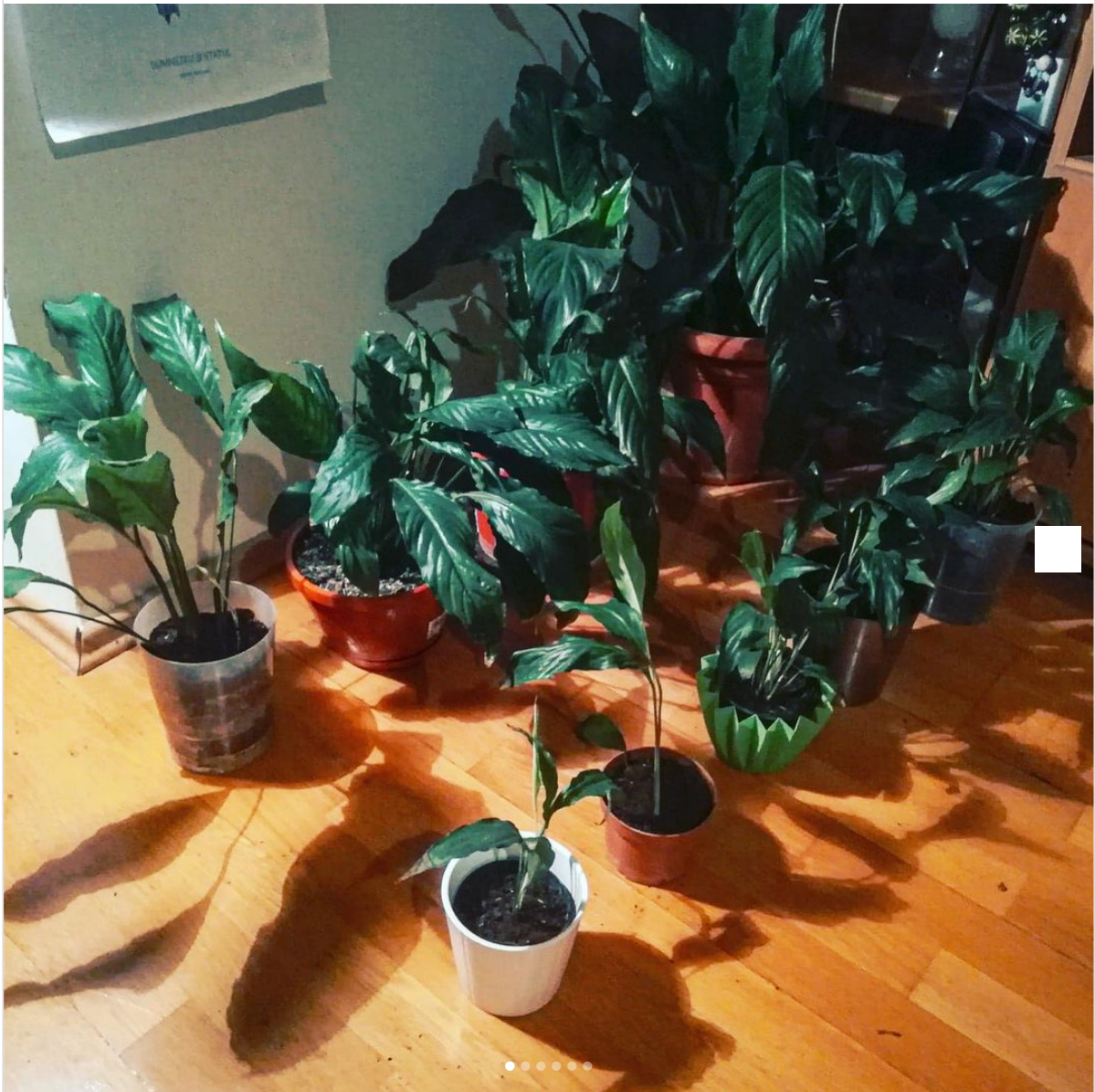
“[Care] For me it is to go out in the morning on the terrace and the first thing I see are the flowers and then I see the green lawn, and it gives me motivation for the whole day. I mean sometimes I spend hours here and my whole family wonders why do I sit for so much time on the terrace! But for me it’s the perfect place”
@merita.zekovic

Care, as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa writes, is “vital in interweaving a web of life” that reveals interconnections and interdependency among earthly creatures.³ Surely, the act of caring remains ambivalent as it might as well be the agent of oppressive and colonizing projects.⁴ And I wish for this tension between care as patronizing and care as transformative to remain present in my account of plant care. Yet, thinking about care—why do we care for something and how caring for something changes our relationship with it—enables me to make sense of the human-plant relationships I present here as emancipatory. By presenting testimonies of plant carers, I point to the process of becoming aware of how plants care for humans. I also reflect on how the shaping of more than human relationships can be generative of new (and more radical) projects of living, understanding, and appreciating the domestic space as political. Hi’ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese write that care materializes an “affective connecting tissue” that enables relationships.⁵ The *Care for Plants* project captures the emergence of affective bonds with plants. With Cubellis, I read care as an affective process that becomes crucial in crises such as the COVID-19.⁶ What makes care radical is its capacity to establish affective bonds that sustain and encourage a reassuring navigation of a precarious present by expanding a (positive) horizon of possibility. Radical care supports projects of remaking worlds that imagine the future as more just and inclusive. In the examples I gathered, care is radical because it allows humans to understand that their activity of care is shared *with* plants. Humans are no longer centered as carers.



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I love this little story from [@hopancarusel](#) 🇷🇺 on what we learn from plants by listening to them 🌿🗣️🌱🌻 During the lockdown, when I would go out of the house only once a week, I realized how profoundly I am connected with nature and how acutely I feel its lack of presence. So I started getting more plants and gardening in my little rented flat in Bucharest. Such a good way to cope with the anxiety and alienation of these times. A few days ago, I managed to repot and propagate these two generous beauties: a Pilea and a Peace Lily, which were suffering a bit due to my period of overwork and their need for more space. They each gave me 7-8 little plants, which I can now give or exchange with friends who have also found strength in this amazing connection with plants. Last year, my little indoor garden has taught me some valuable lessons about nurturing, and how

sometimes less is more, you just have to listen to the different rhythms and watering needs of each being. This year, it is teaching me about resilience, (self)care and generosity during difficult times. I thank my plants greatly for that 🌱🌿🍀"

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Solidarity

Central to this project is an understanding of solidarity as a political project that reinforces networks of care to push for change. Solidarity appropriates care practices as a means to create movement, to support spaces of involvement, discussion, and to strengthen bonds between carers/cared for that are affective. Existing conversations on the possibility of more than human solidarity often focus on agency and debate whether non-human beings are capable of partaking in political projects.⁷ In this essay, I capture the emergence of more than human solidarities in the affective bonds that entangle humans and plants. I resist the notion of human agency as the sole motor of change in favour of an understanding of agency as affective. Jane Bennett postulates "thing-power" as the liveliness and affectivity of all matter that initiates change.⁸ *Care for Plants* gathers and archives examples of how practices of care between humans and plants support affective exchanges that point to worldmaking projects where human centeredness is challenged in favour of an appreciation of interdependence. I reflect on the creation/cementing of affective bonds between humans and plants for its political significance. I interrogate the activity of making home/kin with plants as the emergence of interspecies solidarities, which challenges anthropocentric and colonial narratives of worldmaking and reinsert non-human beings as central to the making of more just and inclusive futures.⁹

The Moment We are Living Now



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A succulent love story from 🇧🇪 "When the second lockdown was announced, I decided to give myself a chance at caring for plants, by starting with succulents. I prepared by getting advice from family and friends, and then found myself 5 little friends: jade, horse's teeth, hoyo kerri, fenestraria, and the common houseleek. They have a central place at the coffee table in the living room where they can get sunlight, but also where I can see them from every part of the room. I know there are many ways in which plants care for us - the most obvious one for me is that they make me feel a little less lonely, and a little more happy by how gorgeous and charming they are." ❤️❤️❤️ Happy Sunday ! 🌱

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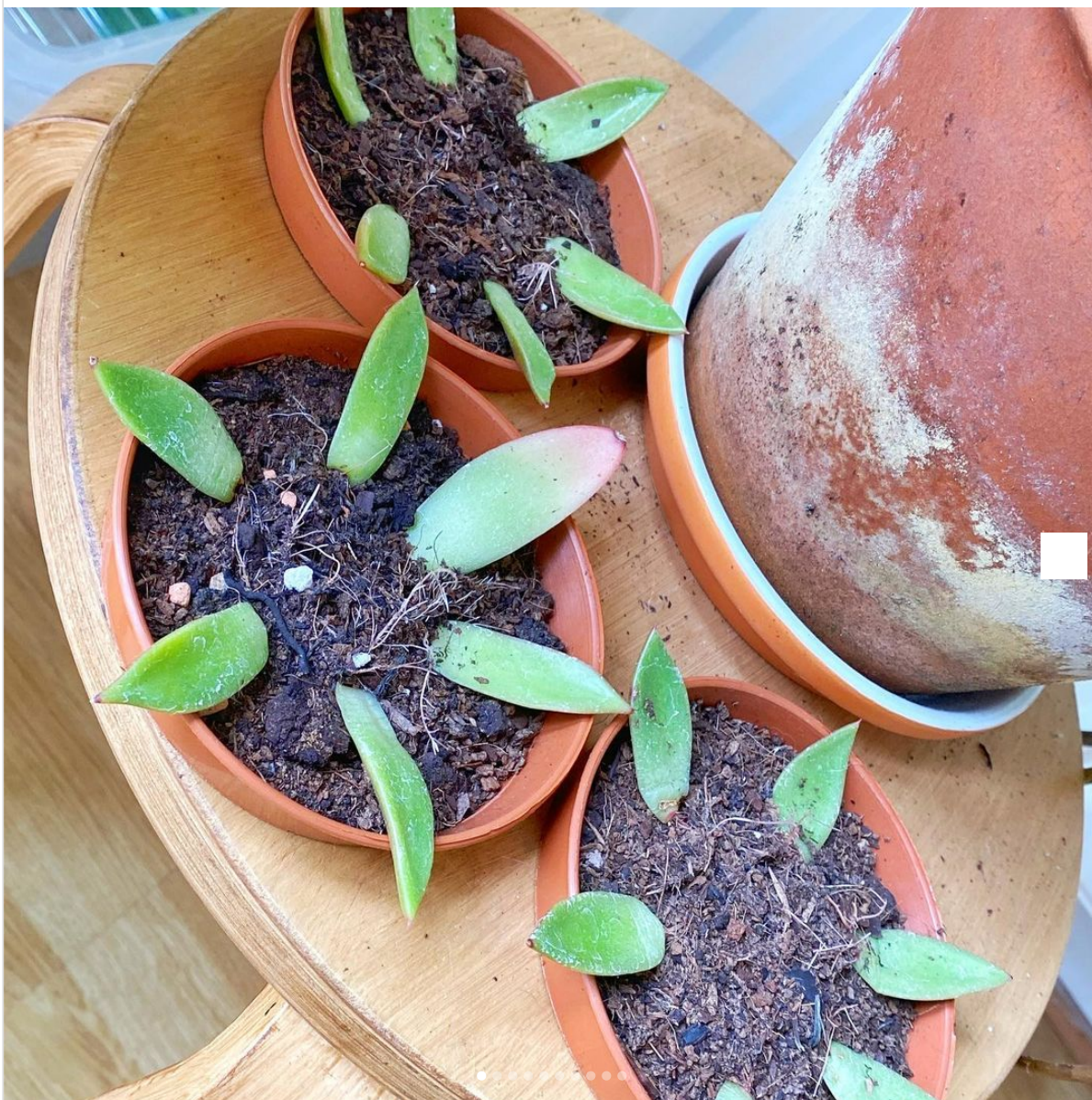
Talking to people during a global pandemic presented a panorama of abrupt change and loss. I approached interviews with broad questions about daily routines, the future, and the meanings of making-life-with-plants. Conversations were often emotional, at times revealing the anger, resentment, and inability to make sense of a raw feeling of loss. For many, life had become an extended present of anxieties, fears, fatalism, and slow movements. Yet, to talk about plants created safe spaces in which to re-engage with the present more positively. In fact, plants allowed my participants to envision the future filled with hope (and life)—expectations of vegetables ripening, or cuttings to root. All the photos I received immortalize the beauty of luxuriant plants.

When I started the interviews, many of my respondents were no longer in lockdown but continued to isolate or limit their social exchanges as a precautionary measure. For all, life had shrunk largely to the space of the home where many lived alone. Thus the lockdown initiated a process of getting reacquainted with domestic space, and plants became a crucial part of this process. All my respondents acquired new plants during the lockdown and over subsequent months. While a few purchased new plants, many exchanged cuttings and seeds in person or via mail, giving new meanings to human friendships, which developed thanks to a shared love for plants.



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Meet [@sarahjanko](#) her beautiful 🐱 Merlin ❤️ and their amazing [#indoorjungle](#) "I started collecting plants when a colleague gave me an avocado plant she had grown and showed me how to propagate a spider plant we had in our office. At the time I had just moved to England - away from my friends and support system in Ireland - and was spending a lot of time at home (with my cat, Merlin). I loved watching those first plants grow, the routine of looking after them, as well as the life, colour and texture they brought into the space. So I kept accumulating plants when I could, and propagating them to fill every corner. When I finally moved back to Belfast a few years later, I carefully transported my collection with me.

Flash forward to the pandemic: lockdown has revived a familiar feeling of isolation from those years in

England. With the amount of plants I have (last count ~40), watering, trimming, propagating them, etc. was already a regular part of my routine. But now, I'm reminded of how much they add aesthetically to the space I'm confined to and serve as a satisfying task to invest my energy into. Being around my plants constantly has allowed me to appreciate all the small changes as they grow; new leaves bring me an embarrassing amount of joy as does figuring out how to revive sickly plants. I've been propagating more than ever before, and swapping clippings with nearby friends. There's also a certain amount of nostalgia about particular plants that have been gifted, propagated or found over the years and how far they've travelled with me. I think it helps to ground me in a time defined by uncertainty and isolation."

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"I bought plants online and because I was at home so much more, I was nesting, you know . . . Lockdown luxury, right?! So yeah, my pandemic privilege has been to be able to nest more, so, I bought more plants and I could spend more time sort of fussing over them." (X., Interview 09, July 2020)

A certain houseplant-craze phenomenon preexisted the COVID-19 pandemic. Often associated with a millennials' aesthetic that favours geometrical lines, Scandinavian furniture, pastel palettes, and green foliage, plants have become increasingly central to domestic life. The attraction to plants' aesthetics—they beautify space and make it cosier—was present in all the accounts I collected and, to many, was the reason they first bought a plant. But living with plants and, especially, sharing home with plants during the pandemic made humans look at them anew.

Staying Home, with Plants



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@poccittedda 's plants family - the red anthurium traveller across the Irish border before lockdown started and the garden blossomed also thanks to extra isolation-care 🌺🌻🌿🌻🌺❤️

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"Everything that is within the house has a slightly different weight in my life now. And somehow the plants are not just something that is there, but something that is there and is your responsibility" ... I think it's . . . it's not just it's beauty that they offer, it's also, well, there's the whole flowers attract the bees and . . . and you feel that they also have other companions that come with them. . . . I think it has been beautiful in the quarantine how many people who didn't necessarily pay attention to houseplants or the garden and now . . . it is something! I have seen it even with friends with one lonely tomato plant on their little balcony and they are sharing pictures, etc. And that's a bond that probably last year didn't exist." (M., Interview, 07 July 2020)

To many, living in confined spaces with plants meant to acknowledge plants as household members rather than pretty objects. Erika Cudworth, writing about life with dogs, argues that "posthumanist households problematize boundaries between humans and other creatures in terms of relationships, behaviour and use of space"— as the production of "muddied life."¹⁰ For Cudworth, the posthuman home is a site of "resistance, and refuge from, an exploitative and exclusionary public world."¹¹ Plants too shape intimacies and ground politics of belonging. The loss of sociality with humans re-valORIZED an already existing sociality with plants, which was often taken for granted or never fully explored or appreciated. Especially because plants, differently from pets, can feed their housemates.



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A new story on growing vegetables in the lockdown 🥕🥕🥕👩: "I planted the seeds with my daughter in March during the lockdown and now we harvested the carrots prematurely 😊 Unfortunately the plant got little greenflies and all attempts to tackle this naturally were not effective (water the plant with coffee or nettle tea; we also collected some ladybugs outside and the greenflies got less, but then they took over again 😊) Anyhow, this is our tiny lockdown harvest, they were actually quite delicious and for my daughter much easier to eat than normal size carrots 😊"

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For many, the process of realizing/accepting plants as kin was articulated in terms of love and I became aware of how a plant that offers beauty or sustenance is love. Will McKeithen reappropriates the trope of the "crazy cat lady" to explore queer geographies of home.

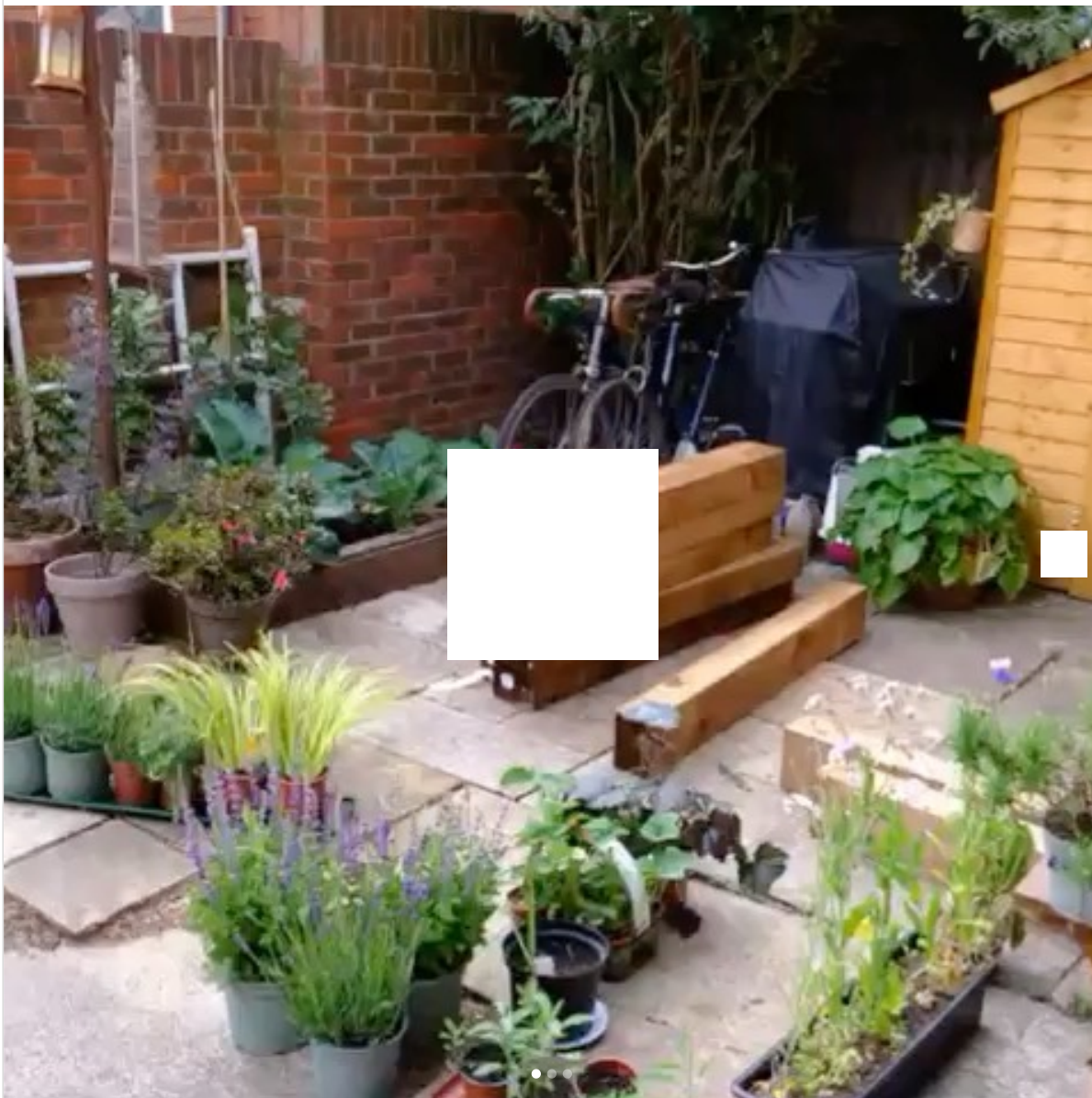
Love for cats—imagined as excessive and misplaced (and thus *crazy*)—reveals multispecies co-productions of intimacy that disrupt human/animal hierarchies.¹² And so it was for my respondents who shared their love for plants. Some addressed their plants as “babies” or “friends” pointing to the intimate relationships they had developed—though many laughed and apologized for sounding *weird*.

The Search for Joy and Respite from a Deadly Pandemic



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Thank you [@camilacocina](#) for sharing highlights of your garden which looks gorgeous !!! 🍷🌸💕🌻 video1. The garden has become probably the most important space in the house. I spend so much time there during the lockdown, that it has been natural to spend energy and labour on it to make it nicer for us, the cat and the bees

Photo2. This little project of a moss and stones garden has grown over the last weeks. Looking at it makes me smile at least once a day

Photo3. Every year we plant vegetables and herbs. The quarantine vegetables are more exciting that ever: courgettes, broad beans, tomatoes, carrots, strawberries..

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“Last week I had a very bad week and it was weeks that I wanted to remove some ivy and I was . . . I was so angry I needed to do something, you know, and I spent two hours removing it and cutting it. . . . And then I calmed down, I sat down and I did it properly again, and I was ok. So, I think that’s also why my relationship with the garden became so completely intertwined with my daily life . . . is because of depression, you know, and at one point it [the garden] becomes a resource to reemerge from the dark place where you find yourself.” (Z., Interview, 07 July 2020)

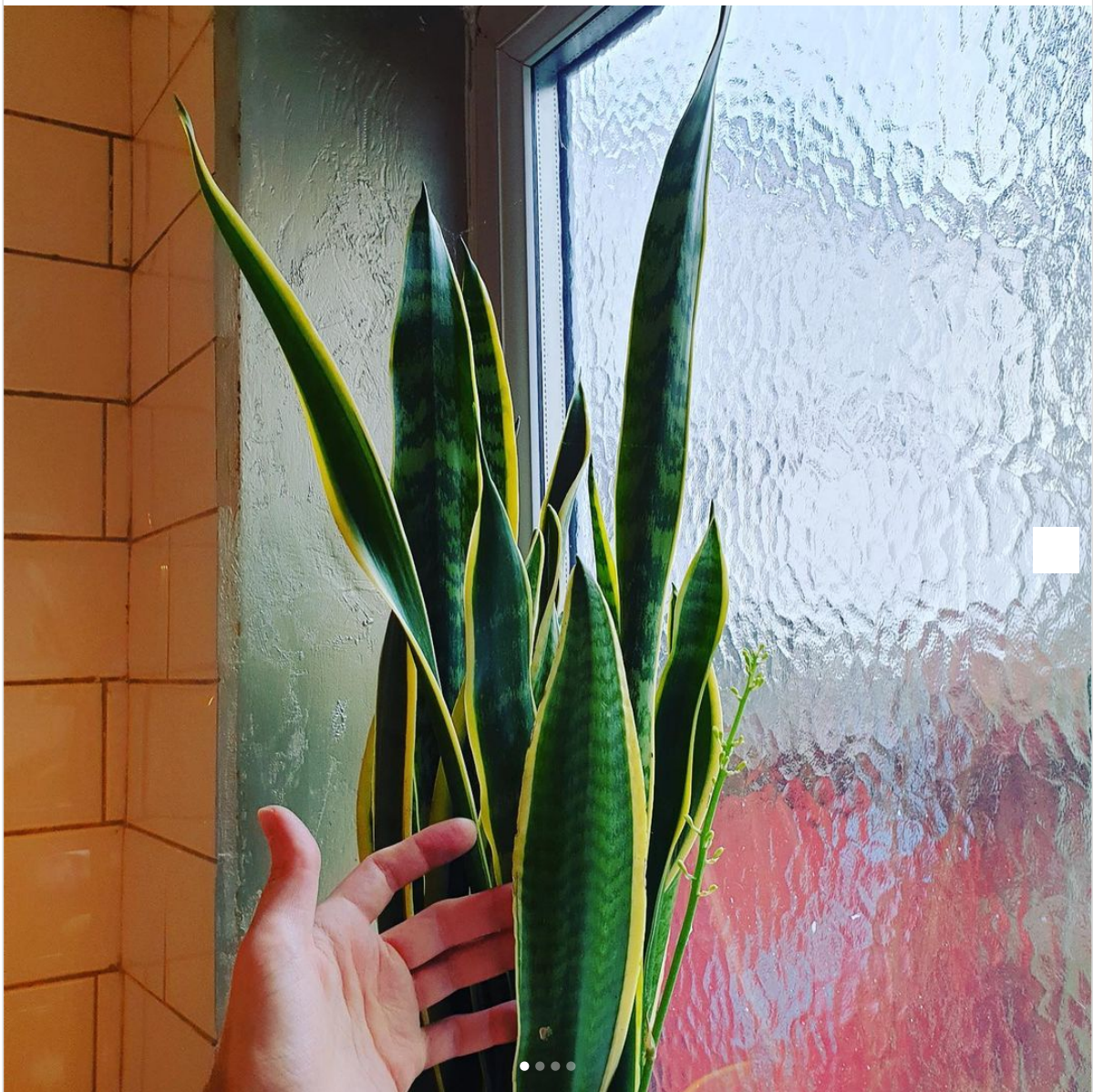
These stories show how “we become attached and even responsible for entangled human and non-human others.”¹³ For many of my respondents, plants have been a constant household presence while, for others, they were a pandemic discovery. Amidst fears, anxieties, and isolation, plants offered a kind reminder that life goes on. They leafed and flowered, adjusted to light, and multiplied. They offered moments of joy, and transformed a space of isolation into a space of (self) care. The testimonies I collected also bear witness to transformative processes whereby humans realized the importance of plants and wished to find ways to communicate their appreciation for them. For example, humans felt as they needed to do more research to understand how to better care for plants—how to listen to plants’ needs and interpret their moods. Some joined online communities to exchange tips, others approached local horticultural societies and bought books. For many, becoming entangled with plants meant to realize that plants take care of humans too.

The *Care for Plants* project is still assembling stories of life with plants to reflect on whether forced social isolation, social distancing, and, more generally living through a global pandemic, favoured the emergence of new ways to approach and understand the roles of non-human beings in human life. Despite the diversity among the experiences I collected, there is one common thread: the reconsideration of plants as more than objects, but as active beings in the making of (non)human bonds and social relations. I think of this process as a radical form of hope, one that promises a transformative trajectory that nurtures new understandings and practices among and between humans and plants, which may lay the groundwork for a more just, equal and ecologically sustainable future. And now, as Natasha Myers suggests, “we need to learn not just how to collaborate, but also how to *conspire with the plants*, to breathe with them.”¹⁴



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More from [@lukebushnellwye](#) 's 🏠🌱 :: These are simply the plants I've had the longest! As well as the spider plant you saw yesterday, the peace lily, snake plant, and the weeping fig are the ones I've had since I finished my masters, got a job, and finally had a bit of disposable income to spend on making my home space a bit nicer, in a space I wanted to actually make my home. They've grown with me since then, with the snake plant even rewarding me this month by flowering for the first time in the four years I've had it!


The small straggly looking sansevieria is even older, as it is the only survivor from the five-pack of succulents and cacti I bought from IKEA ahead of moving to university for the first time, thirteen years


ago. We've both been through some things in the meantime.

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Notes

1. *Care for Plants* is one of three projects contributing to a pilot research on Caring through Vulnerability: Exploring Affect and Emotion during COVID-19, which I developed with Drs. Lisa Smyth and Teresa Degenhardt with funding from Queen's University Belfast in June 2020. [↗](#)
2. Where photos and/or stories have been published on the *Care for Plants* Instagram page and the author chose to be tagged with their Instagram handle, the same is reported in this essay. Extracts from interviews have been anonymized. [↗](#)
3. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care. Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 4. [↗](#)
4. Carolyn Ureña, "Loving from Below: On (De)colonial Love and Other Demons," *Hypathia* 32, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12302> < <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12302> > . [↗](#)
5. Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese, "Radical Care. Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times," *Social Text* 38, no.1 (2020): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7971067> < <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7971067> > . [↗](#)
6. Lauren Cubellis, "Gestures of Care and Recognition: An Introduction," *Cultural Anthropology* 35, no. 1 (2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca35.1.01> < <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca35.1.01> > . [↗](#)
7. See Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: the ecological crisis of reason* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Sally J. Scholz, "Political Solidarity and the More-Than-Human World," *Ethics and the Environment* 18, no. 2 (2013): 81–99, <https://doi.org/10.2979/ethicsenviro.18.2.81> < <https://doi.org/10.2979/ethicsenviro.18.2.81> > . [↗](#)
8. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). [↗](#)
9. For a discussion on Indigenous theories on non-human agency and anti-colonial engagement, see Jerry L. Rosiek, Jimmy Snyder, and Scott L. Pratt, "The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency: Making the Case for Respectful Anti-Colonial Engagement," *Qualitative Inquiry* 26, no. 3-4 (2020): 331–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419830135> < <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419830135> > . [↗](#)
10. Erika Cudworth, "Muddled Living: Making Home with Dog Companions," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 41, no. 3-4 (2021): 425, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-08-2019-0165> < <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-08-2019-0165> > . [↗](#)
11. Cudworth, "Muddled Living," 424. [↗](#)
12. Will McKeithen, "Queer Ecologies of Home: Heteronormativity, Speciesism, and the Strange Intimacies of Crazy Cat Ladies," *Gender, Place & Culture* 24, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2016.1276888> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2016.1276888> > . [↗](#)
13. Joanna Latimer and Gómez D. López, "Intimate Entanglements: Affects, More-than-Human Intimacies and the Politics of Relations in Science and Technology," *The Sociological Review* 67,

no.2 (2019): 256, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119831623> <
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0038026119831623>> . 

14. Natasha Myers, "How to Grow Liveable Worlds: Ten (Not-So-Easy) Steps for Life in the Planthropocene," *ABC Opinion*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/natasha-myers-how-to-grow-liveable-worlds:-ten-not-so-easy-step/11906548> <
<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/natasha-myers-how-to-grow-liveable-worlds:-ten-not-so-easy-step/11906548>> 

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